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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 WARSAW 003298

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [PL](#)

SUBJECT: CENTRIST CIVIC PLATFORM SURGES IN PRE-ELECTION

POLLS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The centrist Civic Platform (PO) has moved into a strong first-place position in the latest opinion surveys, with just a few weeks remaining before Polish parliamentary and presidential elections. PO's recent surge suggests that the party will dominate a coalition government formed with the center-right Law and Justice (PiS), whose own support remains steady and should ensure that the two parties will be able to govern without the need for a third coalition partner. PO has been aided by the remarkable increase in support for its presidential candidate and party leader, Donald Tusk, who now holds a commanding lead over PiS rival Lech Kaczynski and SLD candidate Wladzimierz Cimoszewicz. PO's and Tusk's advantage may yet prove short-lived as opponents resume intensive campaigning after the August lull and redirect their fire, but both the party and the presidential candidate enter the final phase of the campaign in an enviable position, with their popular support at all-time highs. End summary.

Polls mark surge for PO, Tusk

¶2. (U) Three major opinion polls conducted at the beginning of September indicate that PO has broken out of its virtual tie with PiS, as large numbers of undecided voters appear to be moving into its camp as the September 25 vote draws closer. Among likely voters with a clear preference, PO has the support of between 38 and 34 percent, with PiS well behind, drawing between 23 and 29 percent of those surveyed. Significantly, PO's rise has not come at PiS's expense, and the combined support of both parties is now clearly well above the levels to ensure majority control of parliament. These latest polls suggest that just three and possibly four other parties will pass the five-percent threshold for parliamentary representation, with the governing SLD, populist Self-Defense, and right-wing LPR all hovering around ten percent, and the Peasants' party flirting with the five-percent mark.

¶3. (U) The growth in popular support for PO presidential candidate Tusk has been even more remarkable, leading many analysts to conclude that Tusk's rise has driven the increase in PO's numbers. In less than a month, Tusk's support has gone from the low teens to around forty percent of the vote (the three most recent surveys produced nearly identical levels for the three leading candidates: roughly 40 percent for Tusk, 22 percent for Kaczynski, and 18 percent for Cimoszewicz). Self-Defense's Andrzej Lepper remains far behind at ten percent, with the rest of the field in the low single digits. Although many are skeptical -- particularly given the volatility of the presidential race thus far -- that Tusk's support will continue to rise, the PO leader's rapid ascent in the polls has prompted his campaign to look at a possible first-round victory (i.e., more than fifty percent of the vote), something previously considered unthinkable for any of the candidates.

Why Tusk, and why now?

¶4. (SBU) Tusk's opponents attribute the PO leader's standings to his being the only candidate on the hustings during the August vacation season, maintaining that the dynamics of the race will change as it gets into full gear leading up to the first round October 9. Certainly, the PO candidate's team has made the most of the past few weeks, with a full campaign schedule and the launch of a broad and effective media effort. Tusk picked up an important endorsement from rival Zbigniew Religa, who withdrew from the presidential race September 2 (this support is seen as significant given Religa's high personal credibility ratings). The PO candidate was also helped by coverage of the Solidarity 25th anniversary events (at which Lech Walesa reiterated his backing of Tusk) and by Tusk's association with the cause of embattled ethnic Poles in Belarus (he made a high-profile visit there in early August).

¶5. (SBU) Tusk has also benefited directly from the steady fall in public support for Cimoszewicz, whose brief reign at the top of opinion polls was ended by (apparently false) accusations of improper financial disclosure, made by a disgruntled former aide. The affair forced the Cimoszewicz

campaign on the defensive, reinforced the public's association of the candidate with other SLD corruption scandals, and weakened Cimoszewicz's appeal to those seeking an alternative to Kaczynski. Moderate, reassuring and perhaps even a little dull, Tusk was well positioned to inherit the role of "anti-Kaczynski," a figure plausible as president and less ideologically divisive than the PiS candidate (or Cimoszewicz, for that matter). In the end, Tusk may well prevail if only because he has (so far, at least) the lowest negative rankings among the three serious contenders remaining.

Election not over yet

16. (SBU) With as many as forty percent of likely voters still undecided, no one is prepared to suggest that PO and Tusk have a lock on their races, no matter how impressive their leads at this point. PiS has already begun to step up its populist attacks on PO, charging that PO's programs favor the rich; the other parties are certain to join in seeking to reverse the Civic Platform's fortunes. The Cimoszewicz team's initial counterattack on PO (accusing it of complicity in bringing the false charges against him) appears to have fizzled, but Tusk will remain the principle target of the other campaigns as long as he holds on to first place.

17. (SBU) Finally, the polling numbers describe trends, but may not deliver an exact picture. Actual support for protest parties such as Self-Defense and LPR, for example, may be higher than polling results indicate, given some voters' reluctance to admit their preference to pollsters (this phenomenon could be a factor in estimating SLD support as well). As PO's and PiS's combined support surpasses sixty percent, it appears very likely that these two parties will have a majority in parliament, but an unexpectedly strong showing by one or more of the lesser parties could cause a PO-PiS coalition to fall short.

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